DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 439 448 CS 510 257

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TITLE Troublesome Discourse: Analysis of Native Speaker/Non-Native Speaker Conversation.
PUB DATE 2000-00-00
NOTE 23p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; Communication Research; *Communication Skills; Discourse Analysis; Foreign Students; *Interpersonal Communication; *Native Speakers; Secondary Education
IDENTIFIERS *Communication Behavior

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a case study of an episode in a conversation between a native English speaker (the female director of an English language school) and a non-native English speaker (a student apparently with minimal language skills) in which the native speaker is engaged in an extended telling of seemingly crucial information. The troublesome nature of the discourse episode is strikingly revealed at two positions of other-repair initiation and their achievements; one at the beginning of the episode which works to initiate the extended informing, and one at the end of the episode which casts doubt on the accuracy of either participants' understanding of the content of the conversation. The conversation is nevertheless achieved through the use of several mechanisms. Namely, continuers are used as supportive devices to keep the telling going. Also, interruptions are used to hold the floor. The use of these devices, repairs, continuers, and interruptions in a native/non-native speaker conversation offers some evidence of the universal application of conversation analytic components, and evidence that the mechanisms are apparently available to non-fluent language speakers. (Author)

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ED 439 448

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Troublesome Discourse: Analysis of Native Speaker/Non-native Speaker Conversation

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Abstract

Troublesome Discourse: Analysis of Native Speaker/Non-native Speaker Conversation

This paper presents a case study of an episode in a conversation between a native English speaker and a non-native English speaker (apparently with minimal language skills) in which the native speaker is engaged in an extended telling of seemingly crucial information. The troublesome nature of the discourse episode is strikingly revealed at two positions of other-repair initiation and their achievements; one at the beginning of the episode which works to initiate the extended informing, and one at the end of the episode which casts doubt on the accuracy of either participants' understanding of the content of the conversation. The conversation is nevertheless achieved through the use of several mechanisms. Namely, continuers are used as supportive devices to keep the telling going. Also, interruptions are used to hold the floor. The use of these devices, repairs, continuers, and interruptions in a native/non-native speaker conversation offers some evidence of the universal application of conversation analytic components, and evidence that the mechanisms are apparently available to non-fluent language speakers.

Troublesome Discourse: Analysis of Native Speaker/Non-native Speaker Conversation

The ability of people to converse with other people from vastly different cultures with minimal shared language skills is obviously fascinating to large numbers of scholars in the social sciences, spawning separate areas of study in sociology, education, and communication, to name a few. While much work in intercultural communication has focused on cultural differences and the development of categories of cultural variability, the procedures of conversation analysis offer a basis for examining intercultural discourse apart from presuppositions regarding the general cultural backgrounds of the participants. This present study attempts to uncover some structural features of the verbal interaction of native English speakers and non-native English speakers.

These structures are thought to be co-created by the participants in the interactive work of conversing. Specifically, the structure of the extended informing (and the prior and subsequent sequences of talk) in the present case study should exhibit similar features to that of storytelling summarized by Mandelbaum (1989). She pointed out that the structure of storytelling is a modification of the turn-taking system present in many other forms of discourse-- "...the teller takes an extended turn, and recipients offer minimal contributions indicating attention and appreciation" (p. 115). Although the recipients' contributions are minimal, the

recipients actively co-participate in the storytelling. Similarly, the description of the activity in the extended informing of the present case study indicates that both the teller and the recipient perform in specific ways to allow for the telling to take shape. Examination of the discourse episode identifies several analytic components that work as the mechanisms for the achievement of the conversation.

Analytic Components

Although many analytic components could be identified in the present discourse episode, the use of repairs, continuers, and interruptions will be the focus of this analysis. First, the use of other-initiated repairs is important in understanding the troublesome nature of the entire episode. Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks (1977) argued that "the organization of repair is the self-righting mechanism for the organization of language use in social interaction" (p. 381). I argue in this paper that the other-initiated repair sequences witnessed in this discourse episode directs the extended informing. Also, these repair initiations and their achievements mark the closing of the extended informing. In some sense, the entire extended informing could be viewed as a repair in response to the first other-initiation of repair. In this sense then, the last other-repair initiation sequence is a response to the extended informing as a (failed) repair.

Second, continuers (e.g. oh, yeah, uhuh) work as supportive devices that show agreement/understanding/attention

, and keep the informing going smoothly-- "Continuers show their speaker's understanding that a continuing is underway by not taking up an opportunity to take a full turn, and by not requiring a particular turn next from the so-far teller" (Mandelbaum, 1989, p. 117). Continuers occur at possible points that recipients could begin talking and affect these points (Schegloff, 1981).

Lastly, interruptions appear to be used by the speaker of the extended informing not in an effort to take power from (or gain power over) the recipient of the informing, but rather as a response to continuers (or other kinds of utterances doing the work of continuers). This use of interruptions supports the notion that the extended informing works as an extended repair. All three components can be better understood as working together in creating the orderliness of the discourse episode. Simply, the continuers are acted upon as receipts of partial completion of the repair initiated early in the episode.

Data and Participants

The data described here were drawn from audio-tape recordings of conversations between a director of an English language school and new students. The school offers nine levels of English language education. Both male and female international students of various ages and with various levels of English language efficiency enter the school for various purposes. Many of the students hope to enter universities in

the United States after completing the ninth level of classes offered.

The discourse analyzed here is an episode from a conversation between the female director (approximate age 35) and a male student (age unknown). Both participants were aware that their conversation was being recorded. The tape was transcribed by the author. Using the techniques of conversation analysis, a description of the orderliness of the troublesome discourse is offered. The methods revealed how the participants managed the discourse.

Findings

In the following segment of conversation, the development of the troublesome discourse reveals that the recipient of the extended informing solicits its telling by initiating a repair of a troublesome answer to a previous question. The repair of this first answer then takes the form of an extended informing. The extended informing appears to be punctuated with possible transition points that the teller uses to invoke any possible other-initiations of repair. These points of possible transitions (within the extended informing) are occupied by utterances which are responded to as continuers. When the informing is finalized or completed, the last repair sequence casts doubt on the previous claims of understanding (viewed here as continuers). Overall, a sequence of utterances evolves which takes the shape of an inadequate answer to a question that is then expanded to an apparently

adequate one, then that second answer is revealed as inadequate also. This kind of development is made orderly through the use of repairs, continuers, and interruptions.

The success of this interaction is suspect. That is, although the conversation is managed and has an apparent smoothness, the outcome is not likely to be immediately positive for either participant. The teller of the informing did not succeed in adequately answering the recipient's question. Likewise, the recipient did not adequately facilitate the answering of the question. Perhaps one mechanism that is most likely suspect in this apparent failure involved the ambiguous use of "oh" as a continuer and/or a change-of-state token. In the following transcript, "S" represents the student, and "D" signifies the director.

```
    1  S: Eh, how about social security number
    2  D: You: can get one (1.0) or: not (.5) it
    3          doesnt matter.
    4          (3.)
  > 5  S: not (1.0) ah ah do you you can can yoiu
    6          tell me about social security number.
    7  D: Social security number is required of all
    8          United States citisens (1.) we all have a
    9          social security number=
   10  S: =Im not im not a soc [ah i see
   11  D:                      [So you dont hafto
   12          have one (1.) it does make it easier
```

for you: sometimes when you are opening a bank account? they will ask for your social security number (1.) also when you go to the University they will give you an ie: de: (1.) if yoiu have a social security number (1.) that will be your ie: de number (1.)

> S: oh[::

> D: [Then if you dont have so many numbers hhh to remember (1.) see (.5) its a good idea (.5) but if you (.5) what I would recommmend wait until you enroll at the university (1.) Then when you have your I twenty get your social security card with your I twenty from owe es you (1.) for one reason (1.)

S: What ts i [hhh

D: [okay, wai:t t[o get your

S: [ya?

D: social security oka[y when your a student

S: [ahuh

D: in an English school? you can not work (1.) okay so if you get a social security card now. the back will say: can (.5) not (.5) work=

> S: =oh[::

> 39 D: [okay (1.) if you wait until you are a
40 university student (1.) you can work a
41 liddl: (.5) S[o
42 S: [I:
43 inside the[
44 D: [Inside the university (.5) so
45 they will stamp eligible to work on
46 campus (1.) okay and then if
47 you want to work a liddl bit (.5) you can
48 (.5) but if you go to owe es you with a
49 social security card ((telephone beeps))
50 says can not work then you never can
51 (1.) so(.5) I would wait=
> 52 S: =wa:t=
> 53 D: =until your ya until you go up there.
> 54 (2.)
> 55 S: what (.5) what for?
56 D: uncase you want to work?
57 (1.)
58 S: oh

Repairing the Answer to the Initial Question

At the beginning of the discourse, the student asks the director "about Social Security number." Although the question is asked in a awkward and ambiguous way, the sense of the question seems to be understood in light of the sequential

environment. That sequential environment is one in which the student is asking a series of questions regarding legal documents/procedures related to his educational stay in the United States. The director responds to the initial utterance as a question, offering the second pair part of the question/answer adjacency pair.

1 S: Eh, how about social security number

2 D: You: can get one (1.0) or: not (.5) it

3 doesnt matter.

Much is accomplished in these two utterances. The orderliness of even just this initial adjacency pair is significant in light of the fact that the student has limited (perhaps minimal) English language skills. Simply, the student has demonstrated that he can ask a question regarding an important issue and that that question can be understood as a question by a response in the form of an answer. Already, the utterance-by-utterance organization of discourse is demonstrated, in which "some preceding utterance may be said to provide a constraint on the production of some next utterance" (Heritage and Watson, 1979, p. 139). And so, the speaker with even minimal language skills can effectively constrain the production of next utterances. If the answer "you can get one or not, it doesn't matter" was sufficient, then the episode might have been concluded in the next utterance with some sort of response indicating acceptance or perhaps appreciation. However, that was not the case.

What does follow the answer is the absence of a response, that is, and extended pause. One possible explanation for this pause is that the student is thinking (perhaps translating) or is confused. Another explanation is that the student does not know what to say. Either of these options may be viable, but there is no real evidence, and so it is merely speculation about possible motivations. A better explanation stems from an analysis of its sequential placement after an answer to a question and prior to an other-initiations of repair. Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks (1977) pointed out that other-initiations of repair can be preceded by pauses, which are understood as devices used by the speaker of the repair initiation to allow for self-initiated repair. Whether or not the student had in mind to prompt a self-initiated repair, it is clear that the director did not take advantage of the pause.

In the next utterance of the student, it becomes apparent that the preceding utterance is a trouble source. However, the exact trouble in not pin-pointed, not clearly:

1 S: Eh, how about social security number
2 D: You: can get one (1.0) or: not (.5) it
3 doesnt matter.
4 (3.)
> 5 S: not (1.0) ah ah do you you can can yoiu
6 tell me about social security number.
7 D: Social security number is required of all

8 United States citisens (1.) we <u>all</u> have a

9 social security number=

Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks (1977) stated that one type of other-initiations of repair are partial repeats of the trouble-source turn. The "not" in line 5 could be viewed as such an attempt, even though the utterance does not locate the trouble source clearly. It is not clear if the director hears the "not" or understands it to be an initiation of repair. A shorter pause follows which could be occupied by the repair, but is not. Then, the second part and successful attempt at initiating repair is given in lines 5 and 6. This question is equally awkward in phrasing as line 1, but includes a slightly more specific direction, although still vague. Interestingly, the question this time makes reference to the recipient of the question, her expected activity, and himself- "can <u>you</u> <u>tell me</u>..." This repair initiation seemingly works, and is followed by the activity he is requesting-- a telling about social security numbers.

The beginnings of specific repairs to the troublesome answer given in lines 2 and 3 can be seen in lines 7 through 9:

7 D: Social security number is required of all

8 United States citisens (1.) we <u>all</u> have a

9 social security number=

and the utterance in lines 11 and 12:

11 D: [So you dont hafto

12 have one (1.) it does make it easier

In line 7 and 8 she is clarifying what she meant by "you don't have to have one" by opposing "you" to all United States citizens. And in lines 11 through 12, she begins to clarify what she meant by "...can get one or not" (the option). Then in line 12, she begins to provide reasons why he may want to get a social security number (and card).

Change-of-State Tokens Responded to as Continuers

In lines 12 through 19, and lines 21 through 23, the teller of this extended informing is providing a brief listing of reasons for the acquisition of a social security number. Throughout this listing, the teller pauses several times, creating possible transition places. Based upon the response to the student's utterance in line 20, each of the pauses could be viewed as offers by the teller for any other-initiations of repair. It does not appear to be the case that the speaker withheld further explanations until she received some kind of continuer (although supportive nonverbal activity could have taken place). However, as Schegloff (1981) suggested, it may the the case that "the immediately preceding talk may be such as to invite some sort of 'reaction'" (p. 85).

18 security number (1.) that will be your

19 ie: de number (1.)

> 20 S:oh[::

21 D: [Then if you dont have so many numbers 22
hhh to remember (1.) see (.5) its a good

Schegloff (1981) identified two types of continuers (such as "uhuh"), those that are used as a means of passing up an opportunity to take any kind of turn, and those that are used to pass up an other-initiations of repair. In this present case, there are at least two plausible explanations for the production of the "oh" in line 20 above. First, the utterance could be understood as a receipt of the repair object offered in the previous turn. Heritage (1989) argued that "the producer of the repair initiation receipts the repair with 'oh,' thereby proposing a change of state of information and, by implication, a resolution of the trouble previously indicated" (p. 316). In this sense, the "oh" is positioned at the completion of a repair.

Another plausible explanation is that the "oh" is used as a continuer that acts in the place of an other-initiation of repair. In this sense, the "oh" is positioned in the middle of an extended turn. In the present interaction, the "oh" in line 20 does appear to occur at a possible completion point. Also, in this sequential environment, the length (extended sounding) of the "oh" seems to fail "to display understanding of, or respect for, an extended unit still in progress" (Schegloff, 1981, p. 82). However, through the use of interruption, the speaker of the extended informing cuts short the "oh" expressing surprise (change-of-state), and thus acts

upon the "oh" as a continuer offered in place of a repair initiation.

In line 23, the director begins the second part of the extended informing, that of recommending a specific course of action--that the student should wait to get his Social Security number. Then in line 28, the director offers a preliminary to preliminaries. According to Schegloff (1980), preliminaries to preliminaries, or pre-pre's, "serve to exempt what directly follows them from being treated as 'produced in its own right.' They make room for, and mark, what follows them as 'preliminary'" (p. 116). The director's utterance "for one reason" works as a pre-pre. The preliminary comments begin in line 30 and extend to line 39. Then in line 40, the "main business" of the student being able to work if he wants to is stated.

```
> 23          idea (.5) but if you (.5) what I would
  24          recommmend wait until you enroll at the
  25          university (1.)  Then when you have your
  26          I twenty get your social security card
  27          with your I twenty from owe es you (1.)
> 28          for one reason (1.)
  29 S: What ts i [hhh
  30 D:           [okay, wai:t t[o get your
> 31 S:                         [ya?
  32 D: social security oka[y when your a student
> 33 S:                    [ahuh
```

34 D: in an English school? you can not work
35 (1.) okay so if you get a social security
36 card now. the back will say: can (.5) not
37 (.5) work=
> 38 S: =oh[::
> 39 D: [okay (1.) if you wait until you are a
40 university student (1.) you can work a
41 liddl: (.5) S[o

The continuers in lines 31 and 33 are continuers used at possible points of transition to express agreement that an extended turn is taking place, and do not appear to be taking the place of other-initiations of repair. The utterance in line 38, "oh," can be understood as working in a similar way to the "oh" uttered in line 20 previously analyzed, namely as a channge-of-state token acted upon as a continuer.

36 card now. the back will say: can (.5) not
37 (.5) work=
> 38 S: =oh[::
> 39 D: [okay (1.) if you wait until you are a

Final Repair Sequence in Place of Agreement

The point of the second portion of the extended telling that began in line 23 with "what I would do" is offered in lines 48 through 50--"if you go to OSU with a Social Security card (that) says 'can not work' then you never can." This is followed by a significant pause, perhaps in an attempt to

invoke some kind of response, which it does not. Following this pause, the speaker adds a final step to the story (and one could argue to the entire extended telling-- "So, I would wait." Here, the "so" works to summarize or focus the previous extended informing. In other words, it does the work (or has the potential to do the work) of a more elaborate phrase like "because all that I have said to you is true, my advice to you regarding Social Security numbers in general, and your acquiring one for yourself in particular."

What follows is not what one would expect from a recipient who had asked the question to begin the informing, corrected the initial answer, and provided tokens of agreement. In some sense, "So, I would wait" is an invitation to a specific course of future action, and thus solicits a decision. Perhaps the student is aware of the decisive nature of the utterance that should fill this slot (that is, the range of responses is constrained by the prior utterance that works as a final step). The offer or invitation is neither accepted nor rejected. Rather, the three part other-initiation of repair unfolds, casting doubt on the claims of agreement (each "oh" and other continuers) or the very authenticity of utterance-by-utterance smoothness displayed in the entire discourse episode:

51 (1.) so(.5) I would wait=

> 52 S: =wa:t=

> 53 D: =until your ya until you go up there.

> 54 (2.)

> 55 S: what (.5) what for?

56 D: uncase you want to work?

57 (1.)

58 S: oh

In line 52, the first part of the repair initiation takes the form of a partial completion of the just prior utterance and immediately follows the utterance. So, the students utterance of "wait" (pronounced awkwardly) is acted upon by the director (also immediately) as a repair initiation of the sense of when to wait (line 53). I argue that the second part of the repair initiation, the pause, occurs in the sequential position represented by line 54. The extended pause follows an unsuccessful repair initiation. That is, the student's utterance "wait" fails to accurately locate the trouble source. The pause then occupies the position where receipt object of repair would occur if indeed a successful repair was offered. Since the repair attempt is met with silence (clearly a dispreferred response), the failure of that repair should be obvious to its producer.

Since a self-initiated repair (of the attempted repair) is not offered by the director, a third and stronger part of the repair sequence occurs in line 55. This question, "what for?" demonstrates a confusion regarding the reason why a student should wait to get a Social Security number until they enter a University. The reason is found in the sense of the

extended informing in lines 23 through 50, most of the discourse episode. And so, the question "what for?" casts doubt on whether the student understood the sense of this informing.

The repair in line 56 is followed by a pause, perhaps invoking or allowing for another repair initiation or receipt of the repair. Then in line 58, the student accepts the repair, though with a weak agreement, the shortened, softer "oh" which is not a clear acceptance of the invitation to wait. And so, it is not clear whether this repair too was successful.

Conclusions

If the extended telling were delivered as a monologue, the confusion over the sense of why a student should wait to get a Social Security number would not be as disturbing as what developed in the present case study. It is puzzling precisely because the final sequence of utterances contradict the apparent sense-making that the participants engaged in throughout the discourse. The utterances of agreement (change-of-state) seem to be feigned or incorrect upon reflection. Liberman (1995) refers to similar facile agreements as "the grease that smoothes" the friction often experienced in intercultural encounters (p. 121). He argues that "the first rule of intercultural encounters is survival, understanding the meaning takes second place" (p. 120). The utterances of agreement in this present case seem to smooth

out the conversation initially, but, at least in part, are particularly responsible for the "trouble." The nature of the turns preceding and following similar facile in other intercultural conversations needs to be further investigated. Similar patterns of apparent agreement/understanding leading to apparent confusion may exist and could be investigated.

Also, the form of the extended telling seems perhaps too quick in response to the "oh"s, too eager to add additional information, or perhaps the non-native speaker's choices were constrained too narrowly.

In any case, the use of conversation analysis allows researchers to pin-point exactly how intercultural conversations are achieved in spite of language/cultural barriers. CA is able to do this because the analytical components are available to both native and non-native English speakers. This approach offers a way to suspend presuppositions about cultural differences, and examine how intercultural interactants actual converse and co-create the interculturalness or intraculturalness of a given interaction.

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